

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 17

Article 4

2010

SPIRITUAL SOVERIGNTY AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Mary Astell and John Milton

Paige Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paige Reynolds (2010) "SPIRITUAL SOVERIGNTY AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE Mary Astell and John Milton," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 17, Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol17/iss1/4>

SPIRITUAL SOVEREIGNTY AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Mary Astell and John Milton

Paige Reynolds

*I*n *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) and *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644), Mary Astell and John Milton grapple with the meaning of marriage by confronting issues of gender, politics, and religion. Even though separated by more than fifty years, and the ensuing civil war, Interregnum, and Restoration, both Astell and Milton are primarily concerned with the spiritual effects, positive and negative, of the married life. Milton justifies divorce on the grounds that the spiritual consequences of a failed marriage are devastating to a man, while Astell urges pious perseverance because the spiritual benefits of a failed marriage are ennobling to a woman. Certainly the writers approach the subject from different perspectives: Milton is a male, pre-Restoration, anti-monarchist writer whose works supports fundamentally patriarchal ideals, while Astell is a female, Restoration royalist,

arguably “an early—if not the first—English feminist.”¹ Astell’s argument, in fact, almost certainly responds to Milton’s viewpoint—she even references him at one point in *Some Reflections*—and each author similarly uses images of bondage and slavery to represent marital strife as a way of addressing the problem of complete masculine supremacy in marriage.

Though she uses the same mode of biblical exegesis and the Pauline method of argument that Milton had employed, Astell’s work serves as a corrective to Milton’s argument; ultimately, she displaces the man as the center of marriage. Even as she deals with issues of authority in marriage, Astell negotiates issues of authority in her dialogue with Milton. She explains in the preface to her work that her name does not appear on the title page because “Bold Truths may pass while the Speaker is Incognito, but are seldom endur’d when he is known.” She further cautions the reader: “’Tis a very great Fault to regard who it is that Speaks, than what is spoken; and either to submit to Authority, when we should only yield to Reason.”² Astell acknowledges that in authorship as in marriage, especially when up against men like Milton, a woman is at an obvious disadvantage.

While critics are often tempted to come up with a definition of “early modern marriage,” as Richard Grassby observes, what emerges from analysis of various conduct books of the period and other contemporary sources is “a contradictory mix of continuously changing cultural imperatives” rather than a “consistent ideology of marriage.”³ Scholars like David Aers and Bob Hodge complain that “too many academic critics have presented...a homogenized seventeenth century, resolving all tensions, blind to all contradictions and dissidence.”⁴ Such assumptions are perplexing, especially regarding a century in which contradiction and dissidence were distinct—even defining—factors for England as a nation. Religious and political contention divided the country, threatening the seemingly invincible structure of hierarchy;

¹ Bridget Hill, ed., *The First English Feminist: “Reflections Upon Marriage” and Other Writings by Mary Astell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 1.

² Mary Astell, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1730; New York: Source Book Press, 1970). All subsequent references to this work will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

³ Richard Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English Speaking World, 1580–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89.

⁴ David Aers and Bob Hodge, “‘Rational Burning’: Milton on Sex and Marriage,” *Milton Studies* 13 (1979): 3–33.

ultimately, subjects found themselves without a king. The implications of such confusion certainly must have touched society on many levels, questioning ideologies and challenging customs. This is likely one reason the period produced a voluminous body of writings concerning marriage: its nature, its purpose, its durability under stress, and its validity under certain circumstances. The voices of both Milton and Astell resonate despite the vastness of the dialogue in which they participated. Looking at some of the discourses of gender, marriage, and spirituality to which both writers are responding will prove a helpful backdrop to readings of their work.

The Elizabethan *Book of Common Prayer* outlined three reasons for the institution of marriage that were commonly adopted by writers and moralists of the period:

One was the procreation of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurtoure of the Lorde, and praise of God. Secondly, it was ordeined for a remedy agaynste sinne and to avoide fornication...Thirdly, for the mutual societie, helpe, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, bothe in prosperity and adversitie.⁵

Even during the Reformation, when marriage had come to displace the notion of sexual purity as essential to an elevated spiritual state, "the procreation of children" was deemed the chief goal of marital relations. With the Protestants' decisive denunciation of monasticism, marriage also became the only venue in which a woman could pursue the Christian calling for which God had created her: to be a wife and mother.⁶ Since a Protestant woman's service to God was both experienced and perceived primarily in terms of her service to her husband and her children, her role took on a new spiritual significance. To say that husbands suddenly became anxious about their status relative to wives during Astell's day is not accurate, for this anxiety can certainly be seen in a long tradition of earlier writings, including those of John Milton. After the Restoration, however, it seems "there was a concerted

⁵ "The Fourme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonye," *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth*, 1559 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 122.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 116–17.

attempt...to reimpose the traditional role of women...in relation to their husbands.”⁷ Consequently, perhaps as a way of rewriting the legitimate model of authority and submission, Mary Beth Rose explains that there was in the seventeenth century a “burgeoning...critique of marriage that equated wifehood with slavery.”⁸ What is at stake in contemporary discussions of marriage has to do with issues of sovereignty and submission: political, sexual, and spiritual.

After 1660, the cultural obsession with the ambiguity of authority must have been further fueled by a sense of displacement and fear of disorder after the execution of Charles I. In fact, there was a period during the Interregnum, as Stone notes, when “Church of England weddings had been forbidden.”⁹ After civil war broke out in England in 1642, the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer was accused of being “popish” and the ecclesiastical courts practically stopped functioning, resulting in widespread confusion as to precisely what made a legal marriage. In 1653, Cromwell’s Marriage Act, which forbid marriages in churches or performed by clergymen, was passed. Only a Justice of the Peace, with the appropriate documentation, could conduct a marriage ceremony that would be considered valid. As Stone points out, enforcing this legislation was all but impossible, and “the result was chaos.”¹⁰ In 1657, Parliament made matters worse by doing away with only the portion of legislation which forbid “all other forms of marriage than that described in 1653,” but leaving the rest of the law intact. It appeared, then, that “almost any form of marriage was...legal.” As a result, when the ecclesiastical courts were restored after 1660, they were met with “an avalanche of matrimonial suits.”¹¹ If the way in which a marriage began was the subject of such confusion, it makes sense that the nature of the marriage relationship itself would have been a source of debate and dissension as well.

Writers of the period who sought to define marriage had to confront broader issues of gender and religion. Generally speaking, early

⁷ Hill, *First English Feminist*, 22.

⁸ Mary Beth Rose, “‘Vigorous Most/ When Most Unactive Deem’d’: Gender and the Heroics of Endurance in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, and Mary Astell’s *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*,” *Milton Studies*, 33 (1996): 87.

⁹ Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England, 1660–1753* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23.

¹⁰ Stone, *Uncertain Unions*, 20.

¹¹ Stone, *Uncertain Unions*, 21.

modern views of women were inextricable from early modern views of marriage, which played an increasingly important role in religious discussions throughout the period. As has long been noted, even an unmarried woman was perceived in terms of her preparation and prospects for marriage, her potentially tragic or subversive state after marriage, or her anomalous and possibly threatening condition outside of marriage altogether.

Views of women in the popular culture of early modern England were thus almost always situated within marriage and built upon religious grounds that were justified by key passages of scripture. According to Protestant interpretation, the Bible spoke clearly to the natural inferiority, innate wickedness, and intellectual weakness of womankind.¹² Women were believed to be controlled by passion, while men had the supreme benefit of reason. Since women were also thought to have been naturally more vulnerable to sin because of their heritage through Eve, men were warned to keep watch over their wives lest they be overcome by temptation (as, no doubt, they would be). Because of Eve's sin, man's authority over woman was, of course, also punitive. Paul writes to Timothy, for example, that women should submit because "Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and was in the transgression" (I Timothy 2:13–14). The notion that woman was the "weaker vessel" (I Peter 3:7) made the rule of man over her not just a punishment, but a necessity.

In his *Christian Oeconomie* (1609), William Perkins claimed that because of her natural inferiority, a wife owed two duties to her husband: "to acknowledge and reverence him as her head in all things" and "to be obedient...in all things, that is wholly to depend upon him, both in judgement and will." Even when it came to childbirth, the

¹² See, for instance, Genesis 3:16: "Unto the woman he said, I wil greatly increase they sorowes, and thy conceptions, In sorowe shalt thou bring forth the children, and thy desire shall be subject to thine housband, and he shall rule over thee"; I Timothy 2:11–12: "Let the woman learne in silence with all subjection. I permit not a woman to teache, nether to usurpe autoritie over man, but to be in silence"; Ephesians 5:22–24: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your housbands, as unto the Lord. For the housband is the wives head, even as Christ is the head of the Church...Therefore as the Church is in subjection to Christ, even so let the wives be to their housbands in everything"; Colossians 3:18: "Wives, submit yourselves unto our housbands, as it is comelie in the Lord," *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). All other biblical references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

“main glory” for which women were made, men were viewed as active agents while women were seen as passive receptacles: “the male is man of a superiour sexe, fit for procreation,” as Perkins reasoned and “the female is woman of an inferiour sexe, fit to conceive and beare children.”¹³ The notion that procreation was a primary reason for marriage and the ultimate purpose of a woman’s existence certainly has to do with the depreciation of the commodity of virginity in the spiritual economy of the Reformation. It is also, however, representative of the polemic that affirmed the affliction and justified the oppression of women because of their sin in the fall.¹⁴

A woman’s attitude toward her husband was a crucial spiritual matter. Religious beliefs and cultural customs required wives to cultivate meekness, to emulate biblical female models of modesty, and, as the *Homilie of the State of Matrimonie* advises, “patiently beare the sharpnesse of their husbands” in silence (4.3.77).¹⁵ Juan Luis Vives asserts a rationale for female subjection based on evidence that is not only spiritual and legal, but natural: “Not only the traditions and institutions of our ancestors, but all laws, human and divine, and nature itself, proclaim that a woman must be subject to a man and obey him. In all races of animals, the female obeys and follows the male.” Vives goes far enough as to say that “a woman who would not spend her entire substance to free her husband from the least discomfort should account herself unworthy of the name of Christian, upright woman, or wife.”¹⁶ Significantly, Vives conflates “Christian,” “upright woman,” and “wife,” as if the terms were synonymous. The fluidity of such words and meanings is consistent with the Protestant view, in which the antithesis of the wicked woman is not the chaste maiden, but the “good wife.” To not be a “good wife,” or to not be a wife at all, thus had serious spiritual implications.

In his manual on English Huswifery, Gervase Markham offers his vision of the “compleate woman”:

¹³ William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie, or, A Short Survey of the Right Manner of Erecting and Ordering a Familie According to the Scriptures* (London, 1609). *Early English Books Online* (Ann Arbor: UMI 1999–), University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX. 5 July 2005. 24, 130–31.

¹⁴ See Ruether’s summary of Lutheran theology on this matter, *Women and Redemption*, 8.

¹⁵ “An Homilie of the State of Matrimonie,” in *Certaine Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches In the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547–1571)*, edited by Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), 244.

¹⁶ Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual*, edited and translated by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 192.

our English Hus-wife must be of chast thought, stout courage, patient, untired, watchful, diligent, witty, pleasant, constant in friendship, full of good Neighbour-hood, wife in Discourse, but not frequent therein, sharpe and quick of speech, but not bitter or talkative, secret in her affaires, comfortable in her counsels, and generally skillful in the worthy knowledges which doe belong to her Vocation.¹⁷

The idea that marriage itself was “her Vocation” must have been affirming to the wife and mother since the evolving association of vocation with occupation had displaced women, who “lost the option of a religious vocation distinct from marriage” without gaining “an affirmation of their work roles in society as vocations.”¹⁸ The wife and mother became ultimately accountable for the spiritual development of her family, as Markham says, “where from the genrall example of her virtues, and the most approved skill of her knowledges,” they “may both learne to serve God and sustaine man in that godly and profitable sort which is required of every true Christian.”¹⁹ While this increased her responsibility, it also increased her liability; waywardness within the family could easily be attributed to the woman’s failure as a wife and mother. Though men had a monopoly on marital authority, somehow women bore the blame for marital shortcomings—evidence of the woman’s capacity for influence.

In a similar paradox, the belief that the marital relationship was by nature hierarchical did not necessarily eliminate the possibility of companionate marriage. The “mutual societie, helpe, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, bothe in prosperity and adversitie” was, after all, the third reason for marriage offered by the Book of Common Prayer. The desire for at least some degree of companionship explains why early modern moralists stressed the benefits of choosing

¹⁷ Gervase Markham, *The English Hous-wife* (London, 1653). *Early English Books Online* (Ann Arbor: UMI 1999–), University of North Texas Library, Denton, 7 July 2005. 4.

¹⁸ Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁹ Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell says: “Calvin’s sermons and commentaries conveyed an acceptance of women and an acknowledgement of their importance, especially in their vocations as wife and mother” in “The Matrix of Reform: Women in the Lutheran and Calvinist Movements,” *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History*, ed. Richard L. Greaves (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 33; Markham, *English Hous-wife*, 2.

an appropriate marriage partner, as well as the consequences of choosing poorly. Popular culture reinforced this emphasis with popular ballads and expressions, such as "like blood, like good, and like age make the happiest marriage," indicating that happiness in marriage was both possible and sought after.²⁰ Despite the presumption of female subordination, Keith Wrightson argues that there existed in early modern England a sense of the "mutuality of marriage," and further claims that this perspective was not a "novel development" in the seventeenth century, as posited by Lawrence Stone.²¹ Wrightson points out that moralists frequently taught that although woman should submit to man's authority because she was created from him, she was created from neither his head nor foot, but from his side, an indication of God's intent for her to walk beside him as his companion and partner.²² It was for this reason, according to scripture, that the first marriage was ever formed: "the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be himself alone...'" (Genesis 2:18).

William Gouge posits the juxtaposition of hierarchy and partnership within marriage, without acknowledging any difficulty in reconciling the two. In *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), Gouge wrote that "*Subjection* ought to be as salt to season every dutie which [wives] performe to their husband[s]. Their very opinion, affection, speech, action, and all that concerneth the husband, must savour of *Subjection*."²³ While Gouge clearly calls for complete female subordination, he points out later in the

²⁰ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 255.

²¹ Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 91, 103. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). As a corrective to what he calls "the simple moralistic-legal stereotype" of marital relations offered by historians like Stone, Wrightson insists on a recognition of individual personalities and circumstances in the study of early modern marriages (93). Diana O'Hara also criticizes Stone for "overemphasizing structural change," creating problems in his chronology, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 4. Alan Macfarlane, on the other hand, represents the opposite extreme in his interpretation of early modern marriage arrangements. He claims that the "highlighted features of English courtship" were an emphasis on "freedom, familiarity, and emotional and sexual compatibility," as well as "individual initiative," *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300-1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 5.

²² Wrightson, *English Society*, 91.

²³ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622; Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1976), 268-69.

same work that although woman was created from man's side, thereafter man has always been born of woman, so that "neither the man is without the woman, nor the woman without the man." He further states that "though the man be as the head, yet is the woman as the heart, which is the most excellent part of the body next the head...and almost equall to the head in many respects, and as necessary as the head." He commands wives to acknowledge their husbands' superiority and thereby their own inferiority, accusing any woman who does not do so of "monstrous self-conceit, and intolerable arrogance"; however, he also insists that men ought to love their wives tenderly, for a "place of authority" such as the husband holds will "soone turne into *tyrannie*" without love, and warns that "none ought to be dearer" to a husband than his wife.²⁴ For Gouge, a relationship of "fellowship" and communion is not problematized by the hierarchical structure of the husband's absolute authority; however, he clearly acknowledges the limits of that authority even as he affirms its legitimacy.

The disparity between the desire for companionate marriage and the need to maintain a structure of sovereignty and subjection plays itself out in political terms as well as domestic. Indeed, since patriarchal writers such as Richard Hooker and Robert Filmer had presented the family as a little "commonwealth" and vice versa, painting the monarch as the father of the nation, the possibility of breakdown in families posed a serious threat to the political culture as well.²⁵ According to Filmer's *Patriarcha*, for example, the "natural duties of a father" and "those of a king" are "all one." Filmer continues to say that "as the father over one family, so the king, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve...the whole commonwealth"²⁶ As Phillips notes, "father" here can be understood as "husband" as well, especially since a man's wife and children held essentially the same rank in the family.²⁷ Relationships were viewed on a continuum that served to analogize their significance: slave-master, wife-husband, subject-king, Church-God.

Both sides in the civil war, in fact, adopted images of marriage to

²⁴ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 271, 351, 358.

²⁵ Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 97.

²⁶ Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 12.

²⁷ Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, 104.

represent the relationship between the monarch and subjects.²⁸ In the case of tyranny, was the wife (the subject) permitted to divorce a tyrannical husband (the king)? The works of both Milton and Astell are informed by “decades of Protestant discourses that analogize marriage to the state” in this fashion.²⁹ Rose argues that by creating these religious and political links, writers are trying “to equate spiritual, public, and private realms by analogizing the husband to God and the king, the wife to the church and the kingdom”; however, the nature of the pervasive underlying foundation of early modern structure—hierarchy—undermines this claim. By creating analogies in which the husband is linked to the king and then to God, the similar aspect of all three, *superiority*, is emphasized; it is, however, understood that the levels of superiority are not subject to the king and to God even though he rules over the wife. What is truly at stake here is, in Milton’s terms, “civil liberty” in addition to “domestic liberty.”³⁰ In other words, if men cannot manage control in their own little commonwealths, how can the authorities retain the real Commonwealth? One effect of this frequently used analogy is that few relationships could be viewed, in the Renaissance mindset, outside the context of hierarchy. Disruptions in the hierarchy of domestic relations thus posed political problems.

The link between the contemporary debate about the monarchy and the nature of the marriage relationship, as well as the nature of the Christian’s submission to God, reveals the pervasive cultural anxiety about the displacement of order, at least in theory. Some evidence suggests that the sanctioned relationship between sovereignty and submission in marriage was often more rigid in theory than in practice.

Wrightson cites the example of Adam and Susan Eyre to show, through Adam’s diary entries (1647), the limits of male authority in marriage. Adam records several instances of quarreling with his wife to the point of exasperation, but ultimately responds with a desire for reconciliation, attempting a compromise rather than asserting his authority over her. The marriage came close to catastrophe, and Adam even wrestled with the question of “whether I should live with my wife or no, if she continued so wicked as shee is.” Because of his wife’s

²⁸ Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, 116.

²⁹ Rose, “‘Vigorous Most/ When Most Unactive Deem’d,’” 103.

³⁰ Milton, “The Second Defense of the English People,” *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 1117.

"uncharitable" temper, Adam no doubt felt "the weight of immeasurable grief and discouragement" of which Milton speaks (942). He did not, however, seek divorce or abandon his wife. Rather, he came to terms somehow with the limits of his authority in finding a remedy for the miserable marriage and approached his wife not as a master, but as a partner:

This morne I used some words of persuasion to my wife to forbear to tell mee of what is past, and promised her to become a good husband to her for ye tyme to come, and shee promised me likewise shee would doe what I wished her in anything, save in setting her hand to papers; and I promised her never to wish her thereunto. Now I pray God that both shee and I may leave of all our old and foolish contentions, and joyne together in His service....³¹

David Cressy agrees with Wrightson, noting that contemporary authors—both religious and secular—frequently used "images of yokes, knots, and bonds in discussions of matrimony" as opposed to images of domination and submission.³² Still, the predominant description of marriage found throughout official legal and religious discourse has to do with the wife's duty to submit.

Milton, like Adam Eyre, does not find the answer to marital strife in the assertion, physically or emotionally, of the husband's authority. Rather, he claims that no one—not even the husband—should try to "force a mixture of minds that cannot unite" (946). According to public theories of matrimony, a husband need merely to take charge of an unruly wife and force her into obedience in cases of discord, yet this is the a solution which men like Milton and Eyre do not consider viable; or, at least, it just doesn't work for them. To be sure, Milton believes that an ideal marriage requires the privileging of the man's desires, made possible by the woman's submission. He proclaims, however, God's original intention that "the chiefeest and noblest end of marriage" should be "a meet and happy conversation" rather than merely a loveless

³¹ Wrightson, *English Society*, 97.

³² Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 297.

hierarchy.³³ He goes so far as to say that “where love cannot be, there can be left of wedlock nothing, but the empty husk of an outside matrimony; as...unpleasing to God, as any other kind of hypocrisie” (941). Although Milton is arguing for love within a marriage, he assumes such love exists within the context of male authority and female subordination.

A male longing for camaraderie, which he calls “this pure and more inbred desire of joyning to it selfe [the male self] in conjugall fellowship a fit conversing soul,” is at the crux of Milton’s argument (94). He claims, in fact, that when “*St. Paul saith, It is better to marry then to burn,*” he is referring not only to “the meer motion of carnall lust,” but a “desire and longing” to relieve the “unkindly solitarines” of the unmarried state (939). The “rationall burning that marriage is to remedy,” Milton insists, is “more human” than the burning of “copulation”; that is, people are no better than beasts if nothing deeper than sexual gratification exists in their union. Since the woman’s capacity for reason is limited, according to contemporary thought, she must at least serve as “a ready and reviving associate in marriage” to help her husband bear up “against the sorrows and casualties of this life.” If the poor man is, instead, left with a “mute and spiritless mate,” he is worse off than when he was alone (939–40). The husband is “the wanting soul” who “needfully seeks” the “mutual enjoyment” of marriage; as Thomas Luxon notes, the husband “desires,” while the wife “desires to be desired.”³⁴ That she is married at all is, to Milton, cause enough for the woman’s share in the “mutual enjoyment” to which he refers. Certainly, he does not see her contentment as the issue at stake in his discussion of divorce.

Milton’s account of prelapsarian marriage in *Paradise Lost* is representative of the dominant cultural view of his time. He describes Eve’s “beauty and submissive charms” and Adam’s “superior love” as

³³ John Milton, “The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce; Restored to the Good of Both Sexes,” *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 938. All subsequent references to this work will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically. By “conversation,” Milton means not only “living together,” but also participating in a unique “commerce, intercourse, society, [and] intimacy” (OED). For a succinct summary of the various meanings assigned to this word in the period, see Jeffrey Masten, “Playwrighting: Authorship and Collaboration,” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 358–60.

³⁴ Thomas H. Luxon, “Milton’s Wedded Love: Not About Sex (As We Know It),” *Milton Studies* 40 (2001): 55.

the prototype for conjugal love. Eve says that without Adam, she is "to no end."³⁵ She does not yearn for an autonomous relationship with God, just as she does not yearn for higher conversation with Raphael—nor is she supposed to. Milton describes Adam's relationship with God as primary or personal, saying he was made "for God only," but portrays Eve's relationship to God as secondary or associational, as she was made "for God in him [Adam]" (4.442). Eve's confounding of deity and lover is essential to Milton's view of marriage. That the woman benefits by her marriage is a given, since she is drawn to the divine within and through her husband. For the man, however, the rewards of marriage are more variable. Based on his interpretation of God's creation of a "meet help for Adam," a woman "who is no meet help," Milton states, "can be no wife" (*Doctrine* 959). That the woman was made *for* the man places him not only in a position of authority, but of vulnerability as well. His happiness depends on her fulfillment of the wifely role, while her happiness, Milton seems to assume, is an automatic result of marriage itself.

Milton writes *Doctrine and Discipline* in the wake of a failed marriage; Astell writes *Reflections* as one who has never experienced marriage firsthand, though she alludes in her title to a specific example of a marriage gone bad.³⁶ Defying the attitude that only two alternatives existed for a woman in the early modern period—"to marry or to go into a nunnery"—Astell herself did neither, becoming rather a "spinster," a woman who "was seen as unnatural."³⁷ Despite the stigma associated with spinsterhood, Astell did not shy away from the label, and went so far as "to suggest spinsterhood as a real alternative to marriage, and one which might give women...a degree of independence," according to Bridget Hill.³⁸ In her *Collection of Poems* (1689), Astell writes about her "most beloved Liberty" as a single woman:

³⁵ John Milton, "Paradise Lost," in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 4.442.

³⁶ The latter part of her title is *Occasion'd by the Duke & Duchess of Mazarin's Case, which is also consider'd*. For the details of the Mazarin matrimonial case, see Ruth Perry's chapter, "A Monarch for Life," in *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 150–80.

³⁷ Hill, *First English Feminist*, 14–15.

³⁸ Hill, *First English Feminist*, 14.

And thanks to Heav'n my time is all my own;
 I when I please can be alone;
 Nor Company, nor Courtship steal away
 That treasure they can ne'er repay.³⁹

Although Astell may believe that “the Christian Institution of Marriage provides the best that may be for Domestick Quiet and Content,” she does not put so much faith in the “blessed state” that she feels eager to enter into it herself (18).

Because of her belief that “for women...the right marriage partner was of far greater importance than for men,” Astell adopts the responsibility of warning, educating, and preparing would-be wives for the reality into which they will enter upon marriage (50). In a major revision to Milton, Astell claims that even “a reasonable Man can’t deny” that when it comes to marriage, the woman has “by much the harder bargain” (28). As in her earlier work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell serves in *Reflections* as a Pauline—and in many ways, Miltonic—figure, presenting herself as the teacher who places herself outside the community to which she belongs (the female sex) in order to instruct and improve those in that community. Astell assumes responsibility for the spiritual safety and accountability of all women, advising and admonishing them with authority.

When it comes to discussing failed marriage, both Milton and Astell employ the contemporary metaphor of slavery or bondage. Milton claims that if a man should find some reason “whereby he could not perform the duty of a husband without the perpetual dissembling of offence and disturbance to his spirit,” he should be permitted to “dismiss” his wife, both for his sake and, presumably, hers (958). When earlier in the tract he laments that a man must perform the “perpetuall and ceaseles duties of a husband” even in the absence of a gratifying relationship, Milton alludes to the burden of liability placed upon a man at the time of his marriage (942).⁴⁰ When a man inherited all of his wife’s property, possessions, and debts at marriage, he assumed responsibility for her behavior as well. Framed in this way, Milton’s coopting of the

³⁹ Hill, *First English Feminist*, 188.

⁴⁰ See Phillips, *Putting Asunder*. With complete authority came complete responsibility; a husband was not only obligated to financially and spiritually support his wife, but also held accountable for her actions, just as he would have been for his servant’s or children’s actions.

slavery imagery used so often to refer to the wife takes on new meaning; male sovereignty is not only subverted, but inverted.

Milton's treatment of the bondage metaphor complicates his claims regarding the centrality of male authority. He has essentially reversed the effects of female subjection and male authority while still maintaining the paradigm itself. Because the man lacks a partner with whom to have "fit conversation," he is by implication forced into silence, which is, as Mary Beth Rose notes, "inscribed in Renaissance discourses as a female virtue."⁴¹ Since the man is the one who needs the fulfillment of a happy marriage—the *seeker*—when this need is neglected, his privileges as the superior being become "ceaseless duties," transforming his sovereignty into slavery. Milton imagines the couple who has "no correspondence...of the mind" as "two carkasses chain'd unnaturally together" rather than two bodies that become "one flesh." He immediately revises this image of mutual bondage to emphasize the enslavement of the husband: "or, as it may happ'n, a living soule bound to a dead corps" (965). The decay of "two carkasses," both already dead, becomes instead the unnatural "punishment" of one "living soule," the man, being shackled to "a dead corps," his wife (965). If indeed the man held absolute authority in marriage, it would make sense that his "living soule" might bring life to the woman, echoing the Genesis story; instead, he is helplessly burdened with her "dead corps."

Milton further gives the woman power over the man's spirituality, an area in which the husband was unequivocally supposed to be the "head." If a man "shall be forc't to love against a possibility, and to use a dissimulation against his soule" by remaining married, "doubtles his whole duty of serving God must needs be blurr'd and tainted with a sad unpreparednesse and dejection of spirit, wherein God has no delight" (942). "So noble a creature as man," Milton claims, could not "be shut up incurably under a worse evill" than this sort of marriage (938). Using the moral imperative "evill," Milton emphasizes the spiritual danger faced by a man who finds himself in a failed marriage. If God ordained marriage "in words expresly implying the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evill of solitary life," then the alternative for a man enslaved within a bad marriage is precisely that "evill" (935). The misunderstanding of the

⁴¹ Rose, "Vigorous Most/ When Most Unactive Deem'd," 87.

Scriptures has turned marriage, which was meant for "the solace and delight of man," into "a drooping and disconsolate household captivity, without refuge or redemption" (935). The husband, whose rightful role is as ruler, is now figured as a captive in his own kingdom.

Further, Milton lays the burden of responsibility for a failed marriage almost entirely on the woman, claiming that if she is not the "fit soule" the man needs, she "looses him [God] a servant" because she so vexes her husband's spirit (939, 942). When the dissatisfied husband "sees withall that his bondage is now inevitable, though he be almost the strongest Christian, he will be ready to despair in vertue, and mutin against divine providence" (941). He finds himself in danger of losing his salvation, through no fault of his own, but entirely due to his wife's unsuitable temperament, framed here as sin; it is Adam and Eve all over again. Indeed, Milton says of such a wife that the "disturbance of her unhelpfull and unfit society" makes her no better than an "Idolatresse," whose "enticing sorcery" will "alienate his heart from the true worship of God" (942). Milton thus claims that it is spiritually *necessary* for a man to break the bond of a bad marriage.

Astell alters the slavery trope in what seems an almost direct response to Milton's inversion of it. Though Milton had conceptualized the husband as the slave rather than the wife throughout *Doctrine*, clearly citing this condition as spiritually debilitating to the captive man, Astell spiritualizes the wife's enslavement as a means of empowerment. She claims that a woman being courted "must be a Fool...Who can believe a Man, Proud and Vain as he is, will lay his boasted Authority, the Dignity and Prerogative of his Sex, one Moment at her Feet, but in Prospect of taking it up again to more Advantage," and concludes decisively that such a man "may call himself her Slave a few Days, but it is only in order to make her his all the rest of his Life" (30). She further expresses the hopelessness of a woman enslaved in marriage, with a direct reference to Milton that blurs the boundary between the political and the domestic: "how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not *Milton*...nor any of the Advocates of Resistance, would cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a private Tyranny" (34-35). She imagines the state of such "*Female Slaves*" to be one in which they are "perpetually contradicted for Contradiction-sake, and bore down by Authority, not by Argument" and constantly denied their "most innocent Desires, for no other reason but the absolute Will and Pleasure of a Lord and

Master" (7). Her framing of the captive wife suggests that Astell savors exposing the irony of Milton's argument; his claim that the man is enslaved through marriage, despite his position of agency and privilege, seems absurd in the face of her description of the "private Tyranny" some women must suffer.

Though she recognizes the injustice of the marital structure, Astell does not advocate wifely rebellion. Instead, she advises women to "duly examine and weigh all the Circumstances, the Good and the Evil of a married State" and then "either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does" (83). In direct contrast to Milton's argument that a durable union is contingent upon "a meet and happy conversation" of souls, Astell insists upon the integrity of the commitment made upon marriage. Astell warns that although "An ill Husband may deprive a Wife of the Comfort and Quiet of her Life"—the "treasure" he can "ne'er repay," as she says in the poem cited above—such a loss does not nullify the wife's marital vows. Because of the permanent and inequitable nature of the marriage relationship, Astell cautions, "She who elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority, she cannot recall, however he misapply it" (10, 37). Once married, a woman "ought to lay it down for an indisputable Maxim, that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but to Please and Obey" (60). She counters Milton's argument with some scriptural advice of her own: like Paul in 1 Corinthians, she calls those who already are married to "Patience and Submission" (34); those who are yet single, she advises to "Marry more discreetly" if they marry at all (82).⁴²

In contrast to Milton's demand for the divorce rights of the enslaved husband, Astell tells women that once they are married, they must endure their bondage with piety. Mary Beth Rose argues that in *Reflections*, the "wife/slave...has become the hero" because "in Protestant discourse, the necessary virtue required of the marital hero of either sex is not physical strength, but patience," a virtue ascribed to the longsuffering wife (93, 102). In Milton's text, conversely, the man is the slave and hero, but he fights for liberation rather than patiently enduring his trial as a good Protestant hero should. Astell, on the other hand, asserts that "Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that

⁴² See 1 Corinthians 7, especially verse 8: "Now to the unmarried and widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am."

are left to a poor People, who groan under [the] Tyranny” of marriage (34). Astell determines that the way to limit male authority is simply not to support the social constructions that affirm it—in other words, not to marry.

Astell further attacks the heart of the conventional argument—used by Milton and many others—that man is an inherently superior creature because woman was originally made *for* him: “when we suppose any Thing to be made purely for our Sakes because we have Dominion over it, we draw a false Conclusion” (52). She questions men’s motives for marriage, concluding that most often a man wants not a wife in the companionate sense, but “one to manage his Family, an House-keeper, one whose Interest it will be not to wrong him, and in whom therefore he can put greater Confidence than in any he can hire for Money” (41). She criticizes what she sees as the problem of the male ego and seems almost to mock Milton’s idea of “conversation” by reducing it the pacifying prattle with which a wife must be willing to fortify her husband’s fragile pride. Astell contends that a husband merely craves a woman whose “agreeable Conversation will entertain him at Home when he has been contradicted and disappointed Abroad...that is, in any one’s Language but his own, sooth his Pride and flatter his Vanity...when others are so ignorant, or so rude” as to disagree with him (41). Her view of an unhappy marriage has to do with the man’s abuse of the indisputable power he holds over his wife.

In contrast to Milton’s assertion that the effects of a bad marriage upon a man give him the right—even the moral responsibility—to escape such a situation, the effects of a bad marriage upon a woman, according to Astell, actually allow her more scope for spiritual development than a happy marriage would. An oppressed wife must “make her best on’t” and resort to a spiritual context, the only context in which she can excel (37). Although “a Woman has...no Reason to be fond of being a Wife, or to reckon it a Piece of Preferment when she is taken to be a Man’s Upper-Servant” because “it is no advantage to her in this World,” she may find that “if rightly manag’d” her long suffering under such unbearable circumstances “may prove one as to the next” world (88). In *Reflections*, wives are figured not only as slaves, but as saints—a woman who endures a miserable marriage is said to suffer “a continual Martyrdom to bring Glory to God” (88). In this specific revision of the slave metaphor, the wife’s captivity is a sign of sacredness. If the wife is a saint—a martyred one—the husband becomes not just a tyrant, but

a heretic. Since, as Astell insists, "God ordained" marriage "for a Blessing, not a Curse," he who degrades "the Divine Institution" reveals a "foolish" and "wicked" heart (15). Even as such a husband oppresses his wife, he unwittingly empowers her to withstand his abuses. Although Milton warns that an unhappy marriage will cause a man to lose his faith, Astell claims that it will actually strengthen the faith of a woman. Astell's tactful transformation of the slave into the martyr presents women as spiritually stronger than their tyrannical husbands, while Milton's argument that a man's faith is jeopardized by an "unfit" wife makes men look spiritually fickle and feeble.

Both writers agree that chief among the flaws they find concerning marriage is the way in which courtship customs are performed. Milton complains that men are not allowed enough practice with or instruction in courting to ensure that they will make a wise choice. One cannot tell, for example, whether a woman's shyness is "the bashfull muteness of a virgin" or merely a cover for her "unliveliness and natural sloth" (939). Furthermore, one is not permitted to find out because so little "freedom of access" is granted to the couple alone until it is "too late" and they have already been unsuitably tied together (939). He argues that if "a discreet man" is "mistak'n in his choice" and is therefore "unreasonably yoakt," some "charitable means to release him" should be allowed (939).

According to Astell, because convention requires men to lavish compliments upon and profess worship of those they court, women are fooled into thinking they actually believe what they say. Sadly, once a woman "has married the Man she loves, heap'd upon him the highest Obligations, by putting into his Power the Fortune he coveted, the Beauty he profess'd to adore," the tables are soon turned and "It is her Part now to court and fawn; his real or pretended passion soon cools to Indifference, Neglect, or perhaps Aversion" (8). Moreover, women are passive in courtship rather than active, which means that "A Woman, indeed, can't properly be said to Choose; all that is allow'd her, is to Refuse or Accept what is offer'd" (29). If men were to choose with more wisdom, Astell says, and women to accept with more discretion, "it is not only possible, but highly probable... that there... may be, happy Marriages" (17). Ultimately, marriage is not beyond hope for either author.

Astell and Milton both try to establish the meaning of marriage in spiritual terms, and in the end, souls are lost and saved based on issues of sovereignty within the marital relationship. Milton gives all control

to the wife in a bad marriage and the husband becomes a mere slave. Astell gives all spiritual benefit to the wife in a bad marriage and the husband becomes a tyrant. Although both acknowledge the natural hierarchy within marriage—even Astell held traditional views about this—they each still manage to subvert that authority in their writings.